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DELIVERED AT THE OPENING

OF THE

BROOKLYN FEMALE ACADEMY,

ON

MONDAY EVENING, MAY 4, 1846.

BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.,
OF ALBANY.

ALBANY:
ERASTUS H. PEASE.
1846.

(No 202)

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J. MUNSELL, PRINTER.

ADDRESS.

*Gentlemen of the Board of Trustees, Patrons and
Friends, of the Brooklyn Female Academy:*

It is due to candour to say that the invitation with which I have been honoured to address you this evening, has proved a source of some embarrassment to me; and that for two reasons. The one is, that I have found it difficult to justify it to my own sense of propriety, that an occasion which belongs so peculiarly to this immediate community, should be put into the hands of a stranger; especially when there are so many in the midst of you, who are, in every respect, better qualified to meet its claims: but I have allowed myself to dispose of this on the ground that there is, or should be, a community of interest—a universal fellowship,

pervading the republic of letters, and that, if one member rejoice, all the other members should rejoice with it. The other consideration is, that I had not only a very brief notice of your wishes, but that when the notice came, it found me under the pressure of engagements which it was impossible for me to throw off; and I shrunk from an attempt to meet the demands of so grave an occasion, by the hasty and immature effort of an exhausted mind. But here again, it occurred to me that after all, this was more an occasion for the heart than the head; that you would come together rather to rejoice over the completion of your enterprize, than to task your faculties by profound thought; and as I knew there was every thing in the circumstances of your meeting to put you into good humour, I allowed myself to hope that nothing that I should be likely to say, however it might fall short of the occasion, would put you out of it. I shall have gained my purpose if the few remarks I am to make shall fall in with the general spirit of the hour, and especially if they shall aid, in any degree, your appreciation of the magnitude of your enterprize, and thus be rendered even

remotely tributary to the cause of learning and virtue.

If we were ignorant of the purpose for which this edifice has been erected, and were left to conjecture it from the beauty of its situation, the elegance of its structure, or the extent and variety of its accommodations, we should certainly conclude that it *ought* to be some purpose of great moment; for it would seem incongruous that both nature and art should thus be laid under contribution in honour of any thing that does not deserve to be honoured. Nor should we have reason to be disappointed, when the secret came out that this building is to be devoted exclusively to the interests of education. No, there is nothing here, within or around—nothing in these extensive apartments or these convenient arrangements—nothing in the bright heavens arching this eminence—nothing in the surrounding ocean now whitened with sails and teeming with life, and now receiving into its bosom the glorious sun—nothing in this spot so quiet that the weary spirit might well come hither to rest and breathe, while yet it is almost embosomed in one of the largest cities upon earth—I say there is nothing in all

this but what is in admirable harmony with the purpose for which this building has been erected. We cannot overrate the importance of education; and it is fitting that we should testify our sense of its importance, not only by the substantial provision we make for it, but by investing it, so far as we may, with external attractions. I say, then, you have done well in erecting such a building, on such a spot, for such a purpose; and I doubt not that posterity will bless you for this noble offering to the noblest of causes.

And what, after all, does education imply?—for notwithstanding it is one of the hackneyed themes of the age, upon which thousands of tongues and of pens are always busy, there is reason to apprehend that a large portion of the community have most inadequate views of it. I hardly need say that *right* views of this great subject are essential to the attainment of the end which your enterprize proposes.

Education, in its most general sense, comprehends all that variety of influence that is employed for the formation of the human character—for the development and ultimate perfection of the human faculties. How

wonderful, how even sublimely interesting, an object is an infant! Amidst all that feebleness and vacancy are hid the elements of greatness and strength: *there* is the seed of every faculty of thought, feeling and action; *there* are susceptibilities of intellectual and moral improvement which the most comprehensive finite mind is not comprehensive enough to grasp; and the startling reflection is that no one can tell into what that helpless babe may grow—whether the mother is bestowing her caresses and smiles upon an embryo seraph or an embryo fiend. Now it is the province of education, in the large sense in which I am here considering it, to decide this momentous question. And there are various schools into which we are introduced,—some with, others without, our consent, where this forming process is carried forward. There is the great school of Providence, in which God himself is the immediate teacher—every thing that we experience, every thing that we witness, has in it some lesson of heavenly wisdom, which we are bound to ponder and apply. There is the school of Christianity, in which we are permitted to sit at the feet of Him who spake as

never man spake; where there is light from Heaven to illumine the understanding, and breath from Heaven to move and purify the heart. There is the school of the domestic constitution,—there is the voice of maternal love—the altar of family devotion—the influence of parental example, concentrating their respective energies towards the formation of the youthful character. And I may add, there is the school appropriately so called—in which the sole business of one class is to teach, and of another class to learn—such a school as this which the public spirit of this community has now established. This very hour, we doubt not, there begins to flow from this eminence a mighty stream of influence, which is destined to mingle with a multitude of other streams, and to carry with it every where the elements of intellectual and moral fertility. Who can estimate the importance of education, when considered as the training of an individual for what he is to be, and what he is to do, forever? Who can estimate the importance of this institution, when considered as a part, and no mean part, of that vast machinery, which must fix an ever-enduring stamp on the character of multitudes?

But there is a more restricted sense in which the object of education, and the design of your enterprize, may be viewed—I mean, as including such a culture of the faculties, as shall constitute the appropriate preparation for an honourable and useful life. And it is worthy of remark that though the design here contemplated is less comprehensive than that which we were just considering, yet the one is in perfect harmony with the other; for it admits of no question that that process which would involve the best training of an individual for the present life, would also best subserve the interests of his entire existence. Consider this institution then as a fountain of intellectual light; as a place where the early buddings of the mind are to be watched, and cherished, and assisted; where thought, under the teachings of superior wisdom, will learn to mount up to the heights or sink into the depths; and treasures of useful knowledge will be accumulated as the result of these lofty excursions and profound researches: and consider further, that the moral as well as the intellectual is here to be cared for; that at least a general influence is to be exerted to mould the heart to virtue and the manners to

gracefulness;—in short, that all that is here to be attempted, is fitted to exalt and dignify the human character;—consider all this, I say, and let it help you to estimate the importance of the provision which you have here been making. I hope there are none of you, who, in your estimate of education, lay out of view the great and eternal future; but my position is, that if the interests of the present world alone were to be considered, the machinery that is put in operation here to-night is to be regarded as most auspicious in its bearings on the general welfare of society. It falls in with every aspiration of true patriotism and philanthropy. We cannot say that it is a light shining in a dark place; but we *may* say that it is a new light kindled on a high place, in whose quickening beams the present and the future, the near and the distant, are destined to rejoice.

But we have not yet reached the specific end for which this institution has been established—it is not only for the general purpose of education, but for the particular purpose of *female* education. If you will judge rightly in respect to this, you must take into view the place that woman has to fill in the vari-

ous departments of human life; the innumerable channels through which her influence circulates; the responsibility that pertains to her every relation and her every action. True indeed Providence has designated to her her appropriate sphere; and though it be a retired, quiet, and if you please in some respects a humble sphere, it is a glorious sphere notwithstanding;—glorious, because Heaven has crowded it with the means of honourable usefulness. I will not speak here of the insensible influence which a young female exerts upon those of the other sex with whom she mingles,—an influence however which not unfrequently decides, both the character and the destiny; nor yet of the direct and powerful agency which females of extraordinary intellect have sometimes had in directing the destinies of a nation—not to say, in modifying the whole economy of society; but I will only ask you to contemplate woman in her own dwelling, and as participating in the headship of a family; for I do not disparage but honour her, when I say that her throne is in the nursery, and beside the cradle. Here it is that she presides at the very fountain of public weal or wo. Here she sits at the most

quiet of all vocations—that of a mother, and utters words of instruction, or counsel, or prayer, that reach only the ear of her child, and the ear of her Father in Heaven, which yet, a few years hence, may be felt in every pulsation of the body politic. Think it no hardship, ladies, that public opinion excuses you from appearing on the arena of political conflict, or from saying at the ballot box who shall be our rulers, or from standing forth as God's commissioned ambassadors to treat with a dying world. The truth is, you have much to do in these matters; but your province lies farther back—it belongs to you to form the characters of those who are to occupy these high places; to supply by your wisdom and care the intellectual and moral material, out of which the fabric of society, as it is to exist in the next generation, will be formed. Yes, the obscurest of you all, I hesitate not to say, has a hand on the springs of our national prosperity. As the standard of female character among us sinks or rises, I confidently expect that both our political and religious horizon will become more deeply overcast, or the clouds that now darken them will pass away.

Who then that values the welfare of his country or his race, will dream for a moment, that female education is not among the weightier matters of public interest, or will be indifferent to an enterprize which has this for its specific object? The mother gives the first direction to the mind of the child; but surely she cannot communicate what she has never learned; and if she has an undisciplined and unfurnished mind, and especially if she has loose moral principles along with it, what else can be expected than that the earliest and most decisive influence upon the child, will be an influence for evil? On the other hand, let her various faculties be suitably developed and directed by a liberal education; let her be qualified to move with grace and usefulness wherever she moves; let the love of knowledge, of truth, of virtue, be an ever glowing and ever growing principle in her heart; and you may expect that, by God's blessing, her own image will, in due time, shine out upon those who may be committed to her care; and it is not presumptuous to hope that it may be recognized even in the third and fourth generation. If the time would permit, I might speak of the mighty

influence of woman in various other relations; but I venture to say that if she were forbidden every other sphere of usefulness, and were permitted to hold her dominion only in the nursery, she would still rule the world; and on this ground, I put in a claim, in behalf of all the great interests of society, that she should be thoroughly educated.

Is there not something to be said, my friends, in favour of elevating the standard of female education at the present day in consideration of the comparative indifference with which this subject has generally been regarded up to a recent period; and may not the females of this generation justly claim something at our hands in reparation for the wrongs with which their sex have been so long and so cruelly visited? A large part of the history of woman is the history of the most revolting servitude; and from the manner in which she has been treated, you would hardly dream that the breathings of an intelligent, immortal spirit, were there. And even since Christianity has restored her in some measure to the place which God intended she should occupy, changing her from a slave into a companion of man, it has

seemed to be conceded, by a sort of common consent, that her mission does not require any high degree of intellectual culture; and accordingly, the most gifted female minds have been left in many instances well nigh uneducated, and quite unconscious of the native strength and dignity that belonged to them. We claim to be wiser on this subject than those who have gone before us; and since we have found out the secret that the mind of woman is made to be cultivated, and since she has found it out too, shall there not be a goodly coöperation between us to turn the discovery to its legitimate account? She casts her eye back upon her own dark history, and bids us contemplate the brutal oppression, the horrible degradation under which she has groaned so long; and she calls upon us in the name of generosity, of magnanimity, nay of simple justice, to come to a reckoning with her in respect to the past; and to enable her to make up in some measure for what she might have been and what she might have done, if her rights had not been thus shamefully trampled upon. The circumstances in which we are assembled are the evidence that *you* have no disposition to

resist this appeal: the very language of your enterprize is, "Woman has been degraded and depressed, and henceforth she shall be exalted in the scale of intelligence and influence, according to the measure of injury that has been meted out to her."

And may I not say in this connection that the establishment of this institution, while it bespeaks your high sense of the importance of female education, is evidence also of the actual existence of no small degree of intelligence and public spirit. We all know that every effect supposes an adequate cause; and the very conception of such an institution as this—especially the carrying out of the conception to actual accomplishment, must have involved a large measure of wisdom in counsel, stability of purpose, energy of action. We should no sooner expect to find a seminary like this rising up in a thoroughly unenlightened community, than we should expect to see the choicest plants spontaneously shooting forth amidst the sands of Arabia, or even the desolations of winter. And it would be quite too contracted an estimate of the case to suppose that that far-reaching view of things—that regard to the cause of intelligence and

virtue which your enterprize exhibits, originated with yourselves—no, it has been the growth of centuries: it beat high in the bosoms of those who sailed in the *May Flower*; it kindled up great lights here in the wilderness long before civilized man had found a safe or quiet resting place in it; it was one of the elements of that spirit which, at a later period, broke the tyrant's arm; it has been at work in the bosoms of your immediate ancestors; and it has come down to you as a legacy—a treasure to be greatly improved in your keeping, and then to be transmitted, for still greater improvement, to future generations. If, in naming your churches in honour of the Pilgrims, you testify your regard for their religious principles, not less do you show, by rearing institutions like this, that you have been baptized with their spirit as the intelligent and active promoters of useful knowledge.

But if this occasion bids us connect the present with the past, can we avoid also connecting the present with the future—in other words, anticipating the probable results of this enterprize, as they are to be developed in years—perhaps I may say, centuries to

come? I do not forget that between us and the future God has hung a veil impervious in a great degree to mortal vision; and yet after all He has thrown so much light upon what is to be, from the regularity and stability of his ordinances, that we may at least form some probable conjecture in regard to what the future historian of this institution will have to say concerning it. If its legitimate end shall be accomplished, he will have to say that it stood as a great fountain of public blessing; that while its quickening, healing influences went forth in every direction like the rays of the sun, they fell, as if in condensed energy, upon the surrounding mighty population—perhaps it may then be said—the emporium of the world. He will have to say further, that this institution, notwithstanding it begun so well, was like the shining light ever growing brighter; that while it availed itself of every new improvement from without in the science of education, it was itself an originator of improvements, not only for its own benefit but for the benefit of the world; in short, that it was a glorious piece of mechanism that had in itself the self-perfecting principle, while it advanced to

a brighter maturity each individual intellect that moved in it. And finally, if he tells the whole truth, he will have to say that the memories of the men who originated it are blessed; that learning and patriotism and philanthropy are accustomed to go and search out their graves among the multitude in yonder magnificent repository of human dust;* and that if they could come back from their lowly dwelling places, they would thank God anew, that, in his providence, he had honoured them to take the lead in such an enterprise.

My friends, may we not recognize in the birth of an institution like this some indication of the approaching dawn of a brighter day upon our country and the world? I look abroad upon this fair inheritance which our fathers have bequeathed to us, and I am at no loss to detect the footsteps of the spoiler. I turn my ear towards the chief council of the nation, where wisdom and justice and patriotism ought always to be enthroned, and lo! I am confounded by the din of party strife. I even hear *War*—that word from the vocabulary of Hell, spoken, as if it were

* Greenwood Cemetery.

honey to the lips and music to the ear. I inquire for the law, which I used to see exalted in majesty; and the answer is, behold it under the feet of the profligate and rebellious. And when I have become sick of contemplating these adverse signs at home, I go abroad to look for relief; but there alas! I encounter vice and crime of still more steady growth and more appalling features; and I am glad to return and let my eye rest upon what I see immediately around me. Now I am not so weak as to suppose that the grand corrective of these mighty evils is to be found in any system of general education—no matter how complete; nothing short of Almighty, all redeeming Christianity is adequate to such a work as this: nevertheless Christianity has her hand-maids in the accomplishment of her blessed purposes; and one of these is the spirit of general intelligence—that which constitutes the animating principle of this institution. I say then, when I consider that the design of what you have been doing here is to elevate the female character, and thus to convey a benign and healing influence into all the pores of society, I cannot doubt that you have done that

which falls in admirably with the wants of your country and the world. I predict that this seat of learning is to be honoured with some instrumentality, not only in securing the permanence of our institutions and thus exalting the American name, but in promoting the great cause of improvement and happiness throughout the whole human family.

I have spoken with some confidence of what this institution is to accomplish in the progress of future years; but I scarcely need add, that every reasonable expectation of its success must take for granted that it is to be under a wholesome and judicious control. It is not like the mechanism of nature, which God keeps perpetually at work by his own immediate agency; nor yet is it like the mechanism produced by human art, which moves blindly but surely in obedience to material impulses; but it is the higher mechanism of thought and feeling, of motive and purpose, which, according as it is directed, may work out glorious results, or become an engine of mighty evil. Rely on it, if this institution is to accomplish that for which it is destined, it must keep many well disposed and well furnished minds under constant

contribution. Each part of the machinery must be watched with scrutinizing care, with a view not only to prevent derangement or collision, but also to render the whole more perfect in its construction, and more harmonious and efficient in its operation. And let me say, it will never do to attempt to divorce the intellectual from the moral—to educate the intellect and neglect to educate the heart. At least two such mad experiments have been made in our own country within a few years; and the results have been such, one would suppose, as would be likely to prevent a third. It is not enough that there be no positively immoral influence exerted here; for if the light be withdrawn, darkness will come of course: nor is it enough even that morality be inculcated on principles of mere natural religion, as if Christianity bore so equivocal a character that it is at least safe to turn away from her teachings. I would never indeed have this institution prostituted to do homage to an unworthy sectarianism; still I would have it in the large sense a Christian institution: I should wish to see “Christianity” inscribed upon its banner; I should wish to know that Christianity is its guardian an-

gel; and if any other banner were ever to float above it, if any other genius were ever to preside over it, I would say, better that this goodly edifice had existed only in the scattered materials out of which it was made; or having been erected, far better that it should be razed to the foundation.

There is one thought that occurs to me in this connection, as specially worthy to be pondered by those who have the charge of this institution, either as trustees or as teachers, now at the commencement of its course. It is, that it devolves on you, my friends, to give the first direction to that great system of means and influences, that is here to be put in operation. It is not too much to say that it is for you, emphatically, to give to this institution its character; and if you should commit a serious error now, it would be an error so near the foundation, that in spite of all your future exertions, it might incorporate itself, in a disastrous influence, with the whole superstructure. Forget not then that ye are charged with momentous interests. Forget not that every thing you do has an importance, because it will leave a permanent impress. The community which you

represent is joined by our common country and the world itself in charging you to be faithful. Nay, posterity sends up her voice from the distant future, and utters in expostulatory accents that divine mandate—"Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."

I may be allowed to say, in closing these remarks, that, though I am personally a stranger to most of you, there is one reason why I have much more than a stranger's interest in the welfare of your institution—I refer to the fact that several of those who are to be here in the capacity of teachers, are not only of the number of my personal friends, but have for years formed part of my pastoral charge. The gentleman whom you have chosen to be your principal* has long been at the head of a similar institution with which I have the honour to be connected; and though I must not forget that I am speaking in his presence, it is due to truth and justice to say that he has earned a bright name by his vigorous and well directed and long continued efforts in the cause of education. We parted with him, not because we had become

* A. Crittenton, Esq.

weary of his services, but because he indicated his preference for a change; and I am a witness that, in coming to his new field of labour, he brings with him the cordial wishes of his former associates, that he may still have a protracted career of eminent usefulness. Several of the subordinate teachers also have been tried and proved in our institution; and I am sure they will pardon me for saying, that you need wish nothing better in respect to them, than that they may adorn their present station as they have done their former one.

Guardians, teachers, patrons of this Academy—from the heart I wish prosperity to your enterprize. May the institution more than fulfil the highest hopes of the most sanguine of its friends! May the good and the great, even from distant regions, turn towards it an interested, approving, grateful eye! May every page of its history bear some record of God's favouring Providence! May the commanding eminence which it occupies, lifting it towards the fountains of natural light, prove emblematical of its yet loftier intellectual and

moral position, elevating it into communion with the fountain of all spiritual light and blessing!

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